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UNCLAS ISTANBUL 001557

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SUBJECT: TROUBLE IN PARADISE AS EXAGGERATED HARASSMENT

CLAIMS ROIL ISTANBUL ISLANDS

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¶11. (SBU) Summary: Within weeks of Western press reports hailing them as a haven of tolerance and a lingering reflection of Istanbul's historic but much diminished diversity, Istanbul's Princes' Islands have again been in the news in recent days as a result of allegations by a local human rights group that non-Muslim residents of the island of Kinaliada have been systematically harassed by outsiders and Muslim "missionaries." Longtime residents and visitors to the islands agree that there has been a change in tone on the islands, but challenge the argument that there is a systematic campaign against island minorities. Our contacts in the Armenian, Jewish, and Greek Orthodox communities argue that two separate phenomena are at work: an increase in Muslim "missionary" activity, and a simultaneous rise in mass tourism to what previously was a sheltered and privileged enclave. The tensions associated with the latter, our contacts argue, should not be conflated with "religious discrimination." End Summary.

¶12. (SBU) Kinaliada Problems: The island issue burst on the public stage on August 23 with the Istanbul branch of the Turkish Human Rights Association's press statement inviting government officials to take action against what it termed "systematic harassment" directed at minority communities located on Kinaliada in the Istanbul Princes' Islands. The statement alleged that non-Muslim residents had for some time been harassed by outsiders, including verbal harassment, insults, and the "direct threat" of strangers ringing the doorbell and asking to use bathrooms, pools and balconies. In addition, the statement alleged, an increase in Islamic proselytizing had seen women with headscarves ring the bells of Christian homes and invite them to Islam, reciting passages from the Koran, or distributing brochures in front of churches.

¶13. (SBU) Exaggerated: The allegations sparked a flurry of interest in the press, particularly as they came within weeks of Western press articles (notably in the "Christian Science Monitor") extolling the islands as one of the few remaining preserves of multicultural diversity in Turkey. Most of our contacts within Turkey's minority community, however, believe that the allegations are exaggerated, and conflate two separate phenomena-- an undeniable increase in proselytizing activity by Muslim groups on the islands, and a parallel but separate increase in day trips to the islands by residents of outlying districts in Istanbul. Jewish community leaders, for instance, concede that there is a genuine "change in tone" on the island, as it has become the target of mass tourism, but do not see the pervasive and systematic harassment that the human rights association spoke of. Contacts in the Armenian and Greek Orthodox communities concur. Most outspokenly, Hrant Dink, the editor of the Armenian "Agos" weekly told "Hurriyet" newspaper that the allegations were "exaggerated" and "unfortunate," and that the local human rights association had been misled. Subsequently, local officials met with non-governmental organizations and minority representatives, reporting that no incidents of "systematic harassment" could be identified.

¶14. (SBU) Comment: As much as it reflects continuing inter-religious tensions in Istanbul, the Kinaliada episode also appears to reflect tensions between the mass society that has emerged in Metropolitan Istanbul over the last thirty years and one of the few remaining vestiges of old Istanbul. With public amenities on the islands insufficient for the throngs that now congregate there, tensions between day-trippers and local residents were inevitable. While some were religiously motivated, the conflation of the two developments appears to have struck at least a temporary blow to the credibility of Istanbul's local human rights association. End comment.

JONES